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UNCLAS ABU DHABI 00964

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 000964

SIPDIS

NEA/PPD; NEA/ARP; ECA/P:PIVES

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: KPAO TC SCUL CVIS
SUBJECT: UAE: INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION WEEK ACTIVITIES

¶1. (U) Summary: PAO Abu Dhabi postponed International Education Week activities due to the mourning period following the death of UAE President Sheikh Zayed. PAO subsequently spread the activities out over several weeks in November and December. Public Affairs Officers and Education Advisors visited a number of schools throughout the UAE, spoke with students about the value of studying in the U.S. and addressed concerns about the U.S. educational experience. It remains challenging to persuade Emirati families to send their children to study in the U.S. due to misperceptions and fear about the visa process and homeland security measures. End summary.

¶2. (U) PAO initially planned to conduct IEW activities for the week of November 15-19, but postponed them due to the passing of President Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan on November 2, and the resulting mourning period. PAO eventually spread out IEW events over the course of four weeks, from November 23 to December 19, with follow-up activities occurring February 5-6.

¶3. (U) The mission included the International Education Week (IEW) as part of its on-going efforts to reach out to students and parents in the UAE to promote study in the U.S. Post has experienced a drastic decline in the numbers of students from the UAE pursuing educational opportunities in the U.S. after 9/11. In the past year there has been an uptick in the numbers of student visa applications, but there is a long way to go to re-coup the pre-9/11 levels. In CY 2003, we issued only 124 student/exchange visitor visas to Emiratis; in CY 2004, that number jumped to 248. While this is a 100% improvement, we have a long way to go to reach the 2001 student/exchange visitor level of 657.

¶4. (U) Besides describing the overall benefits of a US education, our outreach efforts have included de-mystifying the visa application procedure in order to present a more

positive and accurate picture about the process, as well as to dispel the prevalent fear that the U.S. is a dangerous destination for Arabs and Muslims. These outreach efforts have required close cooperation between the Consular and Public Affairs sections, resulting in the incorporation of material on the visa application process into press kits, conducting joint presentations and placing information on emergency/medical travel on the public website.

15. (U) Occurring in a variety of venues, the mission followed a similar format in presenting IEW activities. The PA officer and educational advisor spoke on the advantages of studying in the U.S. including the following key points:

- Prestige of an American degree
- State-of-the-art U.S. technology and facilities
- Care and attention given to the needs of international students
- Flexibility in areas of academic specialization
- Unique U.S. pedagogical style that emphasizes student ownership of learning.

The presentation included information on filling out college applications, procedures for seeking financial aid, and how to navigate the visa process. All presentations stressed the value of a U.S. college degree, and addressed perceived anti-Arab bias in the U.S. The presenters also provided students with materials published by EducationUSA, and provided instructions on contacting the Educational Advising Center for more information and individual help.

ABU DHABI

16. (U) PA Abu Dhabi kicked off International Education Week on November 23 by holding a DVC with the ECA Educational Advising Office for 40 UAE students interested in U.S. educational opportunities. Although the program experienced technical difficulties, the educational advisor was able to turn it into an interactive session between the participants. They asked questions about U.S. visa policy, services for Muslims on U.S. campuses, current attitudes of Americans toward Arabs and Muslims and other topics. Educational Advisor Abu Dhabi is conducting a second DVC on February 22 due to the interest and demand generated from this event.

17. (U) On November 28, Educational Advisor Abu Dhabi conducted two U.S. education outreach sessions at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi and UAE University in Al Ain, in conjunction with the consular section. PAO used these venues to provide information about graduate study, UAE student visa application procedures and USG educational exchange program opportunities to Emirati national students. On December 12 the Educational Advisor conducted a third outreach session at the 1st annual UAE University Mathematical Sciences Conference.

18. (U) On November 29-30 the Public Affairs Section invited the 50 Abu Dhabi emirate microscholarship high school students to the embassy for sessions on the history of U.S. immigration, tour of the embassy and lunch. Four (4) officers from the embassy assisted in facilitating the discussion. The background of the officers (consisting of junior and mid-level officers including a young single female, a woman married to a Sudanese Muslim, a military officer, and a first generation Muslim-American born in Kabul) provided the boys and girls with examples of the diverse nature of America. The students toured the embassy to learn about the building's cutting-edge environmental features and had lunch in the cafeteria. A few days after the event, post received a package of thank you cards and posters from each of the school groups. APAO Abu Dhabi followed up this session with a presentation on U.S. immigration to the 25 male Abu Dhabi emirate microscholarship high school students on February 5 and the Abu Dhabi Educational Advisor gave the same presentation to the 25 female Abu Dhabi emirate microscholarship high school students on February 6.

DUBAI

¶9. (U) On November 28, PA Dubai held a presentation at the U.S. Consulate for 12 student advisors and career counselors from schools across Dubai and the Northern Emirates. CONOFF Dubai provided information on the visa application process. BPAO Dubai scheduled follow up visits to the schools represented.

¶10. (U) BPAO Dubai gave an IEW presentation at Zayed University on November 29, followed by a meeting with faculty and staff at Dubai Men's College to plan a DMC study tour to the U.S., which was subsequently planned for March. On December 5, BPAO Dubai and Fulbright scholar Nadia Rahman visited the Higher Colleges of Technology in Fujairah where Ms. Rahman gave a presentation on her experiences as an Arab-American and as a journalist working for BBC and Al-Jazeera in the West Bank, and described her Fulbright project on oral history in the UAE. BPAO Dubai and Ms. Rahman conducted a second presentation at the American Corner in the Fujairah Women's College.

¶11. (U) On December 9, BPAO Dubai gave a presentation on options for studying in the U.S. to an assembly of over 250 students at the Indian High School Career Fair. PA Dubai also placed an information booth at the fair, which was visited by over 50 students and parents. On December 18 and 19, BPAO Dubai and Educational Advisors from both Abu Dhabi and Dubai attended "Career Day" events at Dubai National School and Ittihad School, gave presentations and distributed relevant material to over 200 students.

COMMENT

¶12. (U) The IEW presentations were well received by the targeted audiences, indicating positive feelings among Emiratis about the American people and respect for American educational institutions. However, fostering educational exchange among Emiratis continues to be a great challenge. The UAE is a conservative society with families that are reluctant to send their children (especially daughters) to study overseas. These concerns are further reinforced by widespread misperceptions about the hostile environment for Arabs and Muslims in the U.S., which is reinforced daily by television and print news reports. However, successfully promoting U.S. educational opportunities to Emiratis can counter this effect, as anecdotal and poll results (Zogby International - June 2004) indicate a significant increase in Emirati favorable opinion of the American people if they have visited the U.S.

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